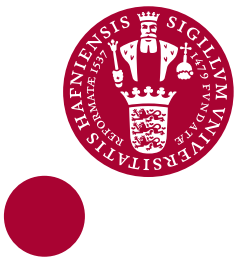

'Is it a donkey?'

Presences, senses and figuration in human-technological border control

Møhl, Perle

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'Is it a donkey?' Presences, senses and figuration in human-technological border control

by Perle Møhl

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Biometric technologies and 'smart borders' are generally associated with complex, high-tech automated systems that control IDs on the basis of recognition (European Commission 2014; Sanchez del Rio et al. 2016), like the facial and threat recognition systems described in the previous chapter. Yet, as we shall see, simpler, often analogue technologies that merely detect bodily presences can be just as efficient, if not more so, in deterring supposed threats as identification and recognition technologies. Indeed, infrared cameras, radars, haptic sensors and sound detectors can identify the presence of a something or someone and qualify their kind, but without identifying them as individuals. They are place-oriented and can detect signs of life and other forms of presences, substances, heat emissions and sounds, and they can also to some extent qualify that presence. If they compare, they do so by detecting likenesses to known categories – is it a donkey, a bird, a human? – but not to known individuals. The links they establish are generally between a body and a place, and it is that link, that *presence*, that can define the body as a threat, an intrusion – a body in the *wrong* place. As some providers say, they perform 'situational awareness' (Dynetics n.d.). The selective intelligence work becomes to determine the *quality* of the presence, and if the presence is defined as a threat, to deter or apprehend the intruding body.

This chapter describes and analyses the workings of a series of such biometric presence-detection technologies as they are used to control border-transgression attempts in Ceuta, Spain, by using different kinds of visual, sonar and haptic technologies that 'see', 'listen' and 'feel' to detect presences and hidden persons. The chapter further analyses these technological practices of border work and the subjects they produce by comparing them to a presence detection system used in Copenhagen Airport to monitor the flow of passengers-as-bodies. The employed technologies are all biometric in that

they measure and identify the *qualities* of bodies, but unlike technologies such as facial recognition, they mainly relate those qualities to spatial parameters and not to delocalized data or IDs. They also relate very differently to the body and the premises for life, as we shall see. It is these differences and their existential and semiotic or sense-making qualities that I would like to dwell on in this chapter.

Borrowing the term 'situational awareness,' kindly provided by detection-technology developers, the analysis will revolve around issues concerning enskilled senses, categorization, selectivity and the attaching of meaning to amorphous entities, discussing how a presence comes to constitute a threat, as well as the kinds of exchanges that take place around the border fence, framing border work as a crossfire of mutual scrutiny and surveillance.

Presence detection, Ceuta

Ceuta is a Spanish urban enclave in northern Morocco only 19.5 km^2. It has been a European frontier outpost since the early fifteenth century and an important strategic and commercial site for guarding the entrance to the Mediterranean. Changing from Portuguese to Spanish rule in 1668, Ceuta became an essential element in Europe's and later Schengen's external borders with Spain's entry into the EU in 1986 (Gold 2000; Pallister-Wilkins 2017). The old city centre is cut off from the African mainland by an immense fortification lined by a sea-water channel dating back to the Phoenician period, and rebuilt by the Spanish in the seventeenth century to avert Moroccan and Portuguese attacks. It now stands as a monumental reminder of the enclave's historically precarious and contested political position.

Besides the amply bridged and mainly symbolic fortification, two borders today separate Ceuta from the rest of the world. To the north, the Strait of Gibraltar, with its strong winds and powerful currents, separates Ceuta from the Spanish mainland and European continent. The Strait acts as a 'natural border', being incorporated into the fortifications of Europe and Schengen tactics of deterrence. Migrants attempting to cross the Strait from Morocco must overcome the harsh and rapidly changing weather conditions and the immensely strong current, and their failure to do so often goes unacknowledged. These disappearances can be categorized as an act of natural forces

for which no political entity or authority can be held responsible. The Strait thus plays the same role as the Sonoran desert along the US-Mexican border, ridding immigration authorities of their responsibility for the deaths, and even sweeping away any evidence of a crime (De León 2015). The open Strait is narrow and easily surveyed, being patrolled by both Spanish and Moroccan coastguards. If intercepted by the latter, migrant vessels are returned to Morocco. Crossing the Strait by ferry from Ceuta to mainland Spain is another option, as we shall see.

To the south, Ceuta is separated from Morocco and the rest of the African continent by an immense double fence lined with sensors and surveillance technologies. The fencing, initiated in the early 1990s with small, relatively symbolic barbed-wire fences, has today developed into a colossus of steel poles, metal grids, watchtowers, concrete, sewer systems and razor wire (see also Andersson 2016; Pallister-Wilkins 2017; Saddiki 2017). However, despite its impressive aspect and perpetual reinforcement, sustained by ostensibly ever more proficient technologies, the fence is regularly scaled and jumped by huge groups of migrants. As the border guards themselves say, it is only a question of time before it collapses, either physically or symbolically. It is in fact the immensity of the fence and its technological 'hardwiring' that, as Ruben Andersson has noted, has triggered the advent of these massive assaults, since 'a critical mass' is now needed to climb it (Andersson 2016).

Both the sea border and the fence are augmented by surveillance technologies. In both border zones, long-range visual and infrared (IR) cameras and radars detect presences at a distance in the upland and sea, whereas different types of haptic sensors are used to detect presences up close. One is the string of haptic sensors built into the fence structure itself, or even skilfully twisted into and hidden in the razor wire. Another type of sensor are the mobile presence detectors that police and border guards take with them when they inspect trucks and containers leaving for the mainland by ferry.

In this particular location, the technologies are thus mainly used to detect unwanted presences, defined as threats. And threatening presences, in this border context, are constituted by two main categories: 'irregular migrants' and stowaways. 'Irregular migrants' are constituted by persons trying to enter Ceuta from Morocco, either by climbing the fence (by far the largest group, primarily Sub-Saharan migrants and, to a

lesser extent, North African, Middle Eastern and Asian groups[1]) or the much more expensive option of getting a ride by ski jet. 'Stowaways' are those who are hidden within cars passing through the land border crossing, at Tarajal II. They come mostly from the richer Sub-Saharan countries, since this is an expensive option or, as we shall see below, in trucks headed for mainland Spain by ferry, an option used mainly by Moroccan citizens. In this chapter, however, I am interested not so much in the actual origins of the different groups and persons who attempt to make it across the border as in how they appear as signs and are read, interpreted and categorized by the border guards in conjunction with presence detection technologies. And, inverting the perspective, I am interested in how particular migrants develop their own technologies and skills in order to read, interpret and circumvent the border and its deterrence modalities.

Beating hearts

'Whenever a truck is getting ready to leave Ceuta, border guards sometimes move in to inspect the loads and containers with their presence-detection gear', Guardia Civil Officer Fernando tells me as we ride through the harbour area on a routine patrol in his green-and-white Guardia Civil SUV. 'The detection gear', he explains, 'is composed of a sensor, similar to a huge microphone, that can be attached to the outside of a container or a truck. The sensor is extremely sensitive to pressure, so it can detect the sound of a pounding human heart'. The system, I learn later, is regulated to filter away 'noise', that is, sounds and other pressure waves that do not correspond to the physiology of a beating human heart and its particular timbre and rhythm, like those produced by motors, the weather and other animals. Another system enables the officers to detect the sound and the particular rhythms of human breathing. Heartbeat and breathing are, as the technology developers say, 'vital signs … which cannot be concealed' (Kurihara and Watanabe 2011). In other words, the technology relies on the fact that one cannot control – that is, stop – the beating of one's heart or one's breathing without annulling the premises for life itself.

'Hiding as stowaways in trucks going to mainland Spain is a popular method for illegal migrants trying to cross the Strait of Gibraltar', Fernando explains. A carnival is visiting, and in a couple of weeks the attractions will be dismantled and the trucks will get ready to board the ferry to go back to the mainland. 'The police and Guardia Civil have been

carrying out a border guarding operation, *Operación Fin de Feria*, for some years at the end of the carnival. Last year they had pretty good results', Fernando says, 'catching several illegal migrants with their presence-detection gear. In the back of a truck, the sensors had identified the signs of a beating heart – and then another – and another. Using their dogs to smell the exact locations of the intruders, the officers crawled into the truck and extracted several adult men who were hiding, twisted around the elements of the carnival attraction like contortionists', as Fernando pictures it. The owners of the carnival attractions were suspected of trafficking but were later released, claiming they had no idea they were carrying stowaways and that the migrants must have hidden in the trucks during the night. The prospective migrants were all Moroccans who had legally entered Ceuta on a day-pass that did not allow them to travel on to mainland Spain. Their hearts and their breathing had betrayed them.

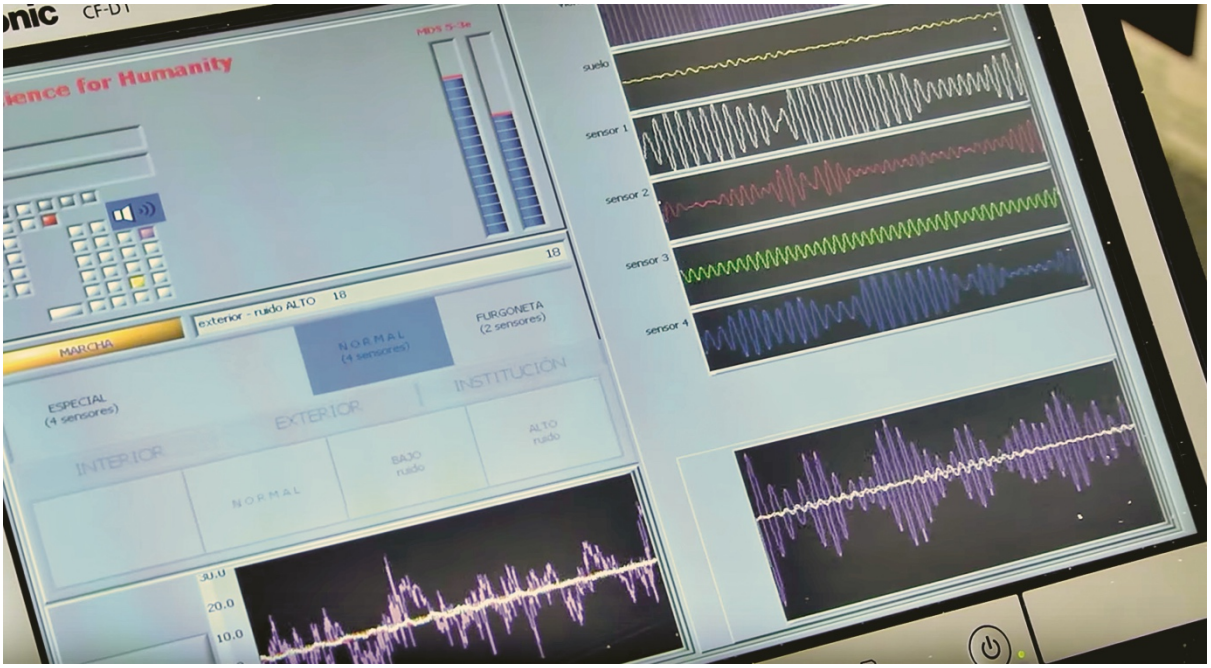

Figure 1. Screen of heartbeat detector (© photo by the author)

The presence sensor functions like a gigantic ear, glued to the surface of the truck. The movement of its membrane – picking up vibrations, filtering them and transforming them into signs of life – simulates the movement of a listening human tympana, simply bigger and more fine-tuned. The agent using the sensor has a screen and a loudspeaker at his disposal, so he can see the vibrations from several human sources, transformed

into visual signals, and also hear them if he wants to. Each of the different hearts shows up as a graph on the screen, showing every heart beat as a peak. From the analysed signals, defined as human or as interferences, the agent directs the search for the stowaways' bodies and their incriminating hearts.

So, like fingerprint scanners (see Part III) or the facial recognition technologies discussed in Chapter 3, the heartbeat sensors work on the basis of iconic sign relations, searching for likenesses between an object – the rhythm and timbre of a beating heart in a stowaway body – and the registered and stored templates of known human heart beats. That is how the filter recognizes a human presence. But contrary to fingerprint and facial-recognition technologies, the presence detectors can hardly be circumvented, and the likenesses cannot be dodged (see Chapter 3). One cannot make one's human heart sound like a dog's heart, nor a motor. There is indeed something of Giorgio Agamben's well-trodden 'bare life' at play here – a bare human heartbeat, unalterable, uncontrollable – or of the unescapable belonging to a single category, the ontological collective that is the human species subordinating all other categorizations, all other profiles, to what is culturally constructed (Rapport 2017: 6). Only the human beating heart is the matter.

The sensor defines an intrusion by coupling it to a particular place, always a place not intended for human presence. It is indeed the hiddenness, the 'stowed-awayness', that defines the presence as a threat, as a body that requires interception, and not the identification of a particular individual. In semiotic terms, we could say that it is the direct, indexical connection between the sensor and the beating heart that provides the sign, the evidence of a presence, and the place that defines the presence as illegal and a threat.

Fernando shows me photos of migrants whom he and his colleagues have found hidden in car seats or bumpers, or wrapped around motors. Every photo seems to attest, in his eyes, the efficiency of the sensors, but also the ruses and desperation of the migrants.

The heartbeat detector can only be used in confined spaces, such as trucks, containers and cars, where the resonances of the sounds are not jumbled by interference. Its ruthless accuracy, rendering almost superfluous any human intervention, any interpretation of

the signals by a border guard, cannot, for the time being, be applied to open spaces and longer distances. But other types of presence detector, haptic, visual and thermal, can be used in the open, as we shall see next.

Fence haptics and other techno-sensory engagements

Along the border separating Ceuta from Morocco runs the 8.5 km long, six-meter-high double fence armed with razor wire and a string of watch towers, floodlights, daylight

Figure 2. Patrolling the border fence with the Guardia Civil, Ceuta (© photo by the author)

and infrared surveillance cameras and haptic sensors, complemented by mobile infrared cameras mounted on the SUVs that regularly patrol the border at night. The fence cuts through the undulating landscape like a saw-toothed knife, running through deserted gorges and valleys, and between houses and gardens where animals stray and children play on each side, stretching into the sea at each extremity, over beaches where tourists sunbathe and swim. All along its sinuous body, the string of surveillance devices clearly

indicates that at the end of the connection someone or something is alert and watching.

In the COS – *Centro Operativo de Servicios* – above the Tarajal border crossing, Isabel, a senior Guardia Civil officer, is surveying her screens. On her desk she has a row of smaller screens, and on the wall in front of her four large screens each depict four images from the more than sixty daylight cameras along the border fence and its sewers. The images automatically shift to new cameras every fifteen seconds or so. A mechanical voice issues an alert whenever the haptic sensors detect movement along the fence. On one of the screens we can see two men repairing a big hole in the fence, made by a group of migrants attempting to cross into Ceuta early in the morning. They only made it through the first fence, being intercepted at the second fence by Isabel's colleagues and returned to Morocco. Because of the repairmen's work on the fence, the voice repeatedly alerts Isabel of an unknown presence in section G / camera 19, and the corresponding camera image stays on. It is distracting, and Isabel would like to turn the alert system off. 'But I can't', she explains, 'in case someone tries something somewhere else.' She looks at the screens as the images from the sixty-odd cameras continually shift and move our attention to new sites along the fence. I cannot make out where they are pointing, but Isabel knows exactly where she is. She knows the landscape by heart, moving through it via the surveillance cameras, she says.

Isabel can also turn the cameras around and scan the landscape with a joystick. They don't scan automatically – that would be a nuisance, she says. The cameras don't know where to look or what to target, and it would be a mess if the images were moving all the time. They can't distinguish important from unimportant, sense from nonsense.

The alerts from the haptic sensors are often triggered by stray donkeys, dogs, large birds, deer and horses passing by the fence, and Isabel just saw something that looked like an ibis, only smaller. She has become quite skilled in animal biology, she says, sitting here for long hours, distinguishing the living from the inert, humans from non-humans.

A few of the images don't shift. The cameras are pointed at the big sewer holes in the fence's foundations that prevent the whole construction from collapsing during heavy rains. The sewers are the fragile points in the fence, she explains, because they are so big. A person could easily walk through them upright.

At another work station, two screens show images from IR cameras that are used at night to detect body heat. On one of them, humidity completely covers the lens. But when night falls, patrols will move along the fence with mobile IR cameras mounted on tall poles. The fixed cameras, as well as those mounted on the patrol cars, are pointed into Moroccan territory. 'When a group of people arrives at the fence, it's already too late for us to react', Isabel explains. 'When they touch the fence, they're already climbing it'.

So the cameras, which point into Moroccan territory day and night, and the images they display on Isabel's and her colleagues' big screens, seem to be the pivotal tool. But the cameras can't see – they need human operators to make the distinctions between humans and donkeys, between local residents and migrants, between the anodyne and the threat.

Isabel's colleague talks about a border guard who worked in the COS some years back. He mainly took night shifts, surveying the screens of the infrared cameras. After a while in the service he could tell the difference between a Maghrebi and a sub-Saharan. I ask them how he could see that from something as indistinct as an infrared image, just a white figure against a dark background. 'He could see it in the shape, the posture, the way of moving and walking, and the clothing.' This was not something he had learned in a training program but was of the order of tacit knowledge, even if his colleagues could recognize and describe it. 'He had a special gift…', Isabel's colleague concludes.

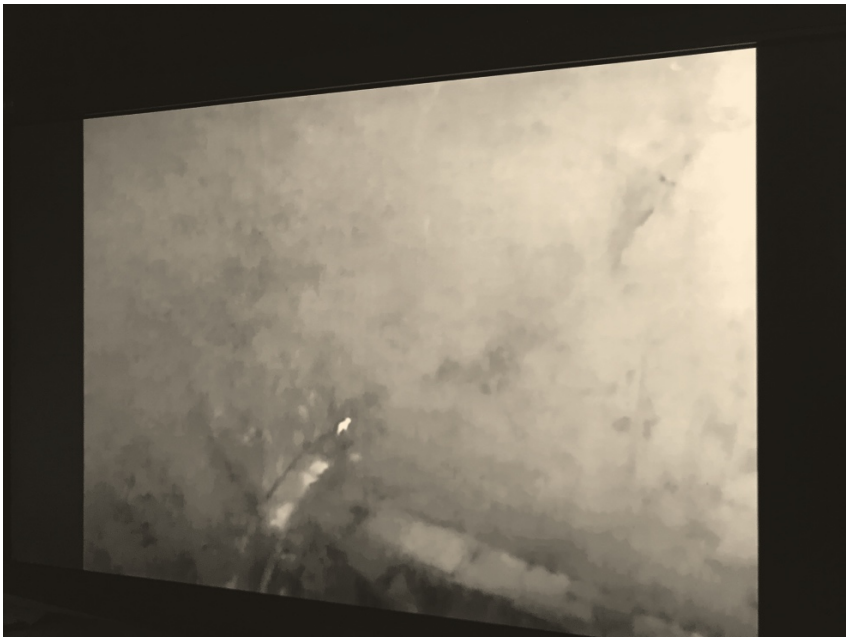

Figure 3. Developing zoological skills with the IR surveillance camera (© photo by the author)

The COS is the central nervous system of an infrastructural installation consisting of the fence and its sewers, watchtowers and hinterland, hooked up to the COS through a sensory network that can feel the presence of bodies, sense their body heat at a distance, and see them as they move and close in on the structure. At the end of the electric nervous system, in front of the screens, human perceptions and interpretations take over the sensory work, attributing meaning to these technical sensations. The figure of the cyborg comes to mind, for the operators in front of their screens form an integral part of this sensory system, manipulating the joystick, switching between images, picking up the alerts of the haptic sensors, scrutinizing the images for details, interpreting all these inputs and, on some occasions, giving orders to mobile units to move out to spots of intrusion.

A cross-fire of surveillance and technological enskilment

The officers in the COS and on patrol along the fence use high-tech presence-detection devices to survey the border zone up close and at a distance, but they are not the only ones on guard. Indeed, as had happened this morning, large groups of Sub-Saharan migrants regularly attempt to cross the fence, sometimes successfully. They have been

lying low in the surrounding Moroccan mountains scrutinizing the fence, the technologies and the routines of the border guards, becoming techno-specialists in their own right. While waiting to work with the Guardia Civil officers in the COS and on patrol, I have been discussing the border technologies with a group of men who managed to cross the fence in February 2017. They seem to know the border zone and the fence, with all its devices, capabilities and failings, as well as or even better than the border guards, for the border has been their focal point for many months, their main preoccupation 24/7. Most of them had tried to scale the fence several times before actually succeeding one early February morning. So they know the fence from close personal acquaintance, they have been cut and snared by it, trapped, deterred and severely wounded, and the signs on their bodies show it. They have an intimate and wretchedly embodied, even haptic knowledge of its materiality.

'Frappe 358', they call their last and final attempt: 'Hit 358'. Like all the other 'hits', it is named after the number of people who managed to cross. And they have all defeated it and can talk about their technological knowledge and skills with pride. One of them, François, gives me details about the fence, the number and type of cameras installed, the routines of the patrols and the watchtower manning on both sides of the border. Over the weeks, he also talks to me about how the migrants organized themselves in the mountains and the many months they spent surveying the fence. I come to learn about the fights between the migrants, the changes in leadership, the regular coups d'état where the leaders and most of their 'government', as they called it, were overthrown, the conflicts and alliances between national groups, the fate of snitches, and the logistics and preparation of the 'hits'. Without him telling me, I sense he is part of the leadership, as indicated by the way the others still relate to him. And he confirms that, although the organigram is no longer officially on display because those in leading positions would be charged as traffickers and held responsible for the damage to the fence and the border guards, the internal hierarchy will endure even as time goes by and the surveillance will continue from within Ceuta. He has clearly played a leading role in the organization and tells me about their intelligence service, *their* border work. They surveyed the border with binoculars and even, at some point, a night vision monocular, and they were in constant touch via mobile phones.[2] They could track the movements of patrols, detect

their routines, count their numbers and keep track of their schedules, nights, days, weekdays, weekends and holidays. And over the months, they would get an idea of the Guardia Civil's technologies, how they used them and when they failed to work properly, that is, in heavy rain, fog, strong wind, smoke or strong sunlight. They singled out the infrared cameras that weren't working and noted when they were undergoing maintenance. They figured out how topography and weather played a part, when it was to their advantage, the fragile areas, and when and where to 'hit' by surprise. And one early morning they moved in on the border in one of those fragile zones where the technologies were failing and patrol access was difficult. They lay low on a mountain slope for 24 hours, covered only by low bushes while the Moroccan forces unknowingly changed shifts in the nearby watchtower. And when the time came, all 358 men rose out of the bushes, stormed the fence and managed to cross it and run all the way to the CETI before anyone noticed.

They continue to survey the fence from the other side. The CETI (*Centro de Estancia Temporal Inmigrantes*), where they are lodged while waiting for their expulsion order – paradoxically executed by giving them a laissez-passer and a ferry ticket to the Spanish mainland – was only designed to hold 512 migrants, but was accommodating 1100 at the time of my fieldwork. They know that when a new group manages to break through the fence an equal number of CETI residents will be sent across the Strait.[3] Without saying much more, I understand that they also engage in digital communications and intelligence networks across the fence and that those exchanges also play their part in the border work, just like the agreements between Spanish and Moroccan police and border guard agencies.

After the 'hit' in the morning, the Spanish Minister of the Interior announces that the border in Ceuta will be made *más inteligente*, that is, 'smarter'. Drones will be set in to patrol the border, also providing surveillance of the most inaccessible areas where most of the 'hits' take place. Fernando and his colleagues roll their eyes. They know very well that there are 'dark spots' that are difficult to survey and patrol, that the migrants have the upper hand because they can choose the time and place and take the border guards by surprise, and that they will always come and cannot be stopped. And they also know from first-hand experience that technology is not the answer. They acknowledge that the

migrants have good reasons for wanting to move into Europe and that the solutions are rather of a political and economic order, as well as being on a much higher level, out of their hands. They seem quite disillusioned. As for the drones, 'Who is going to fly them? And who is even going to look at the images and interpret them?!' There are already only very few people on duty every night to patrol the fence and survey the screens in the COS and, Fernando adds, the things won't even be able to fly in the narrow gorges of the border: 'This is Gibraltar; the winds are far too strong, they will crash into the mountain walls within minutes!' Some months later the minister rolls back his proposal to purchase drones for border control in Ceuta.

Reading signs, detecting threats

In all these border control settings, visual, aural and haptic presence-detection devices register and measure bodily qualities and detect bodily presences. Coupled with human interpretative skills, and sometimes even special 'gifts', it becomes possible to define their kind. The technologies range from complicated seismic devices with digital filtering and infrared detection of body heat to tactical communications and direct visual inspection and analysis. In all cases, the presences detected make sense as threats because of their spatial positions, the locations in which they are situated, whether hearts pounding in a container or bodies moving in on a fence. The categorizations and profiles are made on the basis of assumptions vested in these localized bodies about their past and future moves, not on their identities and on previously registered data. On the screens, the bodies show up as simple graphs, dots or vague outlines, signs that need to be interpreted and given content for action to be taken. Is it a dog, an ibis, a human? Is it a threat? For in the end, border control is all about reading signs, whether the interpretation is done by an algorithm, a device, a human or, as most often, a combination of these.

Presence detection, Copenhagen Airport: the surveyors surveyed

Presence detection is also used in other settings where the vague figures take on other meanings because they are inscribed in other spatial, political and economic

configurations. To both broaden and sharpen the analysis of the interpretive work of presence detection and to understand how vague contours take on meaning depending on their contextual organizational and political configurations, a final example will be presented briefly. In this example, the dots also constitute bodies in movement near a border, but the *objects* of control are not the bodies themselves, but the system *impeding* their movement. In this case, the object of control is itself a border police unit, creating queues and obstructing flows in an international airport. The example serves to turn around the perspective of figuration and control once again in order to further our understanding of the scope, functioning and semiotic qualities of these types of biometric surveillance technologies and of the particular kinds of 'situational awareness' and threats with which they work.

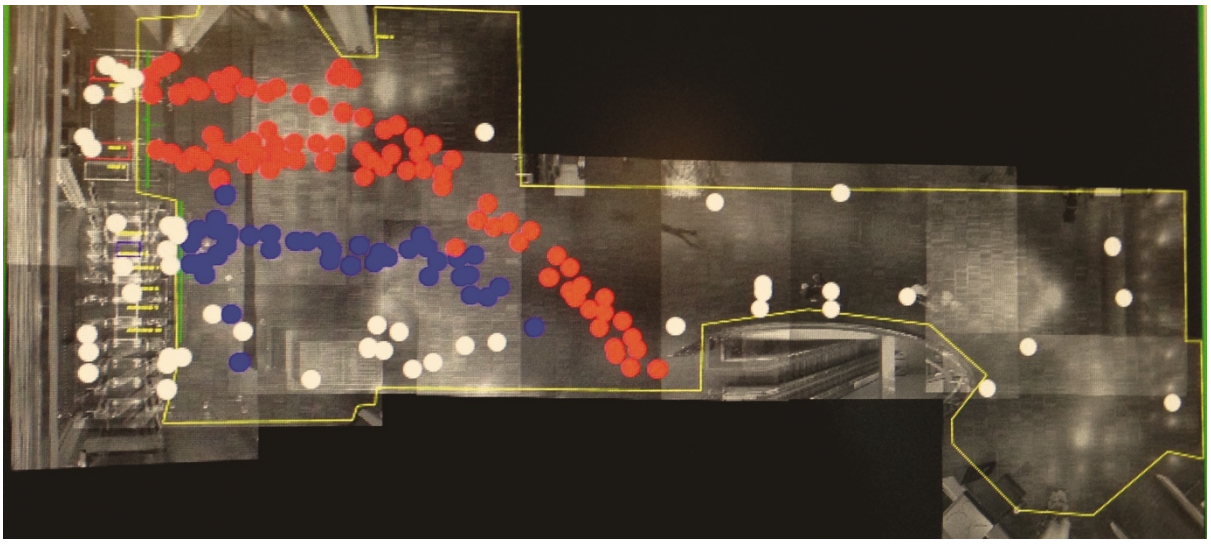

Figure 4. Flow detection, Copenhagen Airport (© photo by the author)

> *In the main working space of the Border Police in Copenhagen Airport, a big screen on the wall shows a black and white still-image of the floor in the border area. The inert image becomes animated when a person moves into the zone. '3D people-tracking sensors' installed in the ceiling of the border zone detect the human presence, and a small white dot starts moving across the image on the screen. If the person queues up at the manual passport control, the dot turns bright red. If the person slows down in front of the Automated Border Control, the dot turns blue. If all goes well, all the white dots remain white, meaning they are in movement, only momentarily halted by the border*

control.

> *At present, the many red dots have turned into a big glowing red blob on the screen, indicating that too many people are queuing in the passport control instead of reaching their flights or lingering in the shopping areas. But in the police office no one looks at the screen except for the anthropologist, who is fascinated by the aesthetics of the imagery, the small moving dots that change colour, and the fact that the border guards are themselves being monitored and controlled. The border guards, on the other hand, don't look at the screen. They know perfectly well when people are crowding: they can hear it through the thin walls, sense the bustle and see it from their service center, the 'aquarium' that overlooks the border zone.*

However, although the police officers no longer notice the screen, the red and blue dots are certainly seen, registered and audited in the offices of CPH Airport A/S, the private company running the airport. And they will use the figures in their next negotiations with police management and Frontex about increasing flow and reducing retention on the Schengen border by lowering the settings of the threshold of resemblance in the ABC (see Møhl 2018).

The bodies registered by the tracking devices in the airport are anonymous, like the migrants trying to move in on the fence or across the strait. Their identities are not important. They are, until proven otherwise, devoid of anything other than potentiality, posing different kinds of possibilities and threats. But threats come in many forms, and here the bodies, rising not out of the bushes but in the lack of flow, directly threaten commercial interests. The border police wish to fulfil their obligation to protect the border against what are defined as threats to national and European interests, whereas CPH Airport A/S wishes to have more active consumers in the shopping areas, even at the cost of lowering vigilance. These two threat images and their respective agendas clash. The question, though, is whether the motivations for guarding the borders of Ceuta and Europe are in fact so different, and whether economic agendas do not also play just as decisive a role in the overall policies of erecting border infrastructures and investing in ever more proficient technologies. This is suggested by several analyses of borders and migration deterrence as sites of industry, economic investment and spectacle (e.g.

Andersson 2016; Andersson 2014; De Genova 2013; Gammeltoft-Hansen and Sørensen 2013). In these different presence-detection systems, travelers, migrants and border guards all become *objects* of policy (Feldman 2013): different types of policies, different agendas, yet all part of the flow and management of the Border World.

Situational awareness and the nature of blankness

This chapter has raised several questions concerning the semiotic and political processes involved in characterizing seemingly void figures and the nature of a presence. How does one attribute meaning to a white, anonymous dot or figure? How does one learn to see and read them, vest them with intentions and see them as threats? What are the categorizations and selectivities involved, when do they operate on an individual basis and when are they collectively enskilled and formatted?

First, the presences that appear as heartbeat signals and white or red figures on screens are simply biological presences, devoid of personal identity, devoid of any individual characteristics. In terms of biometric identification, they are 'data blanks', 'whats' not 'whos' (Feldman 2013; Rapport 2013). In Michel Serres' terms, we could call them 'white multiplicity', 'blank figures' that could be vested with any identity, any scenario about the past and the future (Hetherington and Lee 2000; Svendsen 2011). The 'blank figure' seems to relate quite well to these anonymous dots on the screen, stripping the moving bodies of all predetermination. Every dot is possibly *an anyone*, a 'cosmopolitan anyone' (Rapport 2017) – but in an ideal world, then, one without borders. For the anonymous and unidentified dots are mobile and vectorized: they have a direction and a presumable goal in the eyes of the border guards. In that sense, they already have a story.

On the nature of blankness and writing about the painter's white canvas, Deleuze holds that it is anything but blank. 'It is a mistake to think that the painter works on a white surface. … [E]verything he has in his head or around him is already in the canvas, more or less virtually, more or less actually, before he begins his work' (Deleuze 2003: 71). In the same manner, he says, the 'blank page' is already full before we start writing. In other words, the slate, canvas or figure is never blank, *rasa*; in our perception it is already saturated with stories and images, possible pasts and futures, from a variety of sources. The painting is made not by the painter in an artistic void, but in an interplay

between the artist's body, senses and intentionality, and complex, shifting political, ideological, aesthetic and economic forces. Deleuze uses the painter's work and white canvas as a means to think about society and politics, as well about sensations and meaning. Following this allegory, the border guards' sensory work takes place within particular political and technological settings. More concretely, as we saw in Chapter 3, their senses are enskilled and formatted not only in isolation, but in a particular community of practice (Grasseni 2007; 2011) – and, we might add, in an interplay with the technologies that form and are formed by human perceptions and agendas. The white dots on Isabel's screen, then, do not simply constitute Michel Serres' blank figures, but are already vested with meaning, with significance and presumed goals, because they are localized and vectorized. For example, unidentified threats present unspecified enemies. A donkey, a Moroccan and a Sub-Saharan are all living bodies, all white figures, but with very different political and practical meanings and immediate consequences for border control.

The unidentified presences that move about Copenhagen Airport and queue in front of the border control, forming big colourful blobs, are not blank either, even if they are merchandized as 'anonymous' (XOVIS AG 2019). To the XOVIS system and its tentacles, they have the identity of potential consumer bodies. And when they are transformed into blobs they constitute dense signs of occlusion and lack of flow. They are figures played out in the negotiations between private and public interests: between the airport's desire to create a seamless experience of pleasure and consumption and the authorities' need to control identities. And, like the TIP images described in Chapter 3, they are converted into numbers and used for negotiations when the border control agency and the individual border guards' productivity are audited at the end of the month. Analysing their particular and somewhat simplistic mercantile and auditing semantics clearly points to the semantic density of seemingly blank figures that could be vested with any story but that usually have a quite clear – here, commercial – story, written directly into both the technologies and the policies surrounding their installation.

Zooming in on the very minute daily interactions between technologies and bodies, both surveyed and surveying, enables us to understand more about the sensory activities that lie at the basis of every human activity, including border work, the fine balance

between technological detection and human interpretation, and how different bodies are constituted as more than neutral objects and come to stand as threats. It also puts into perspective some illusions we might have about the efficiencies of the technologies in use and sheds light on the discrepancy between political narratives about the character of the threats and the infrastructural means to deter them on the one hand, and the sensations and experiences of those who engage in border work on a daily basis – who meet the 'threats' in the form of real human beings and go about their tasks, often without much illusion about their utility – on the other. Inverting the perspective paints a larger picture that includes both internal ambiguities and mutual awarenesses and draws a more nuanced picture of what separates and what unites people on both sides of the border, both in their daily tactics and in their technological-sensory work.

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NOTES

[1] During my fieldwork in 2017, an average of 1100 individuals were staying in the *Centro de Estancia Temporal Inmigrantes* (CETI), waiting to have their cases processed; a total of 2244 'irregular migrants' entered Ceuta that year (El Faro de Ceuta 2018). The great majority, approximately 70%, were Sub-Saharan men who had entered by jumping the fence and who were not requesting asylum, plus just a handful of women who had passed the border as stowaways in cars or on jet skis. The rest were mostly Algerian, Syrian and Sri Lankan men.

[2] Another young man describes how, before jumping the wall, they burned all their cell phones to avoid tracing and police intelligence work. In a similar vein, Ruben Andersson describes the tactics of migrants using GPS and compasses and throwing them overboard before arriving in the Canaries so not to be seen as captains and traffickers (Andersson 2010: 37).

[3] Once arrived, they are placed in temporary centers for a maximum of three months, after which they are required to return to their countries of origin. Complying with the expulsion order was, however, not part of the plan of any of the persons I discussed this with.